Report

to the

Honourable Ronald C. Giffin, Q.C.
Minister of Education

by the

Standing Committee
on
Human Resources

LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS
In The Nova Scotia Public School System

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... *i*

Committee Membership *i*
Acknowledgements *i*
Report Distribution *iii*

SECTION I:

Statement to the Minister..... 1

SECTION II:

Committee Deliberations..... 2

Effects of the Current System on the L.D. Child.... 2

The Learning Disabled Adult..... 3

Special Education Facilities in Nova Scotia..... 3

Nova Scotia Statistics on Learning Disabilities.... 4

CONCLUSIONS..... 4

SECTION III:

Recommendations..... 5

Bibliography

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Human Resources is a committee of the Nova Scotia Legislature. Its mandate is to consider matters normally assigned to or within the purview of the Ministers and Departments of (i) Labour, (ii) Education and (iii) Advanced Education and Job Training, and matters relating to the Status of Women. [1960 R.60 (2-c)].

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and Saint Mary's

York University, Toronto, Ontario

Lesley College, Cambridge, Massachusetts

In addition, the Committee wishes to thank Hon. Arthur Donahoe, Speaker of the House of Assembly, the Editor of Hansard and his staff, and the Custodian of Province House and his staff.

Report Distribution:

This report was compiled, on the Committee's behalf, by the Committee Secretary and distribution, in addition to the Minister and his Department, will be as follows: to all those who participated in this study, and to the Hon. Arthur R. Donahoe, Q.C., Speaker of the House of Assembly and to all Members of the Legislature.

SECTION I

STATEMENT TO THE MINISTER

Mr. Minister -

We, the Members of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, in submitting this report and recommendations, would like to convey to you our deep commitment to the large number of learning disabled children and adults in Nova Scotia.

From the outset, this all-party Committee came together in a united effort, to effect some badly needed reforms on behalf of these Nova Scotians. You will have noted, from transcripts of our discussions, that political barriers were virtually non-existent. The spirit of co-operation provided all of us with a large measure of satisfaction. We feel that this has been a most rewarding experience.

We trust that you will give your close attention to the recommendations we have submitted, and consider early implementation of the same.

Respectfully submitted,

Jerry Lawrence, M.L.A.
Chairman

Hon. R. Colin D. Stewart

Hon. J. A. MacIsaac

Hon. Neil LeBlanc

Marie Dechman, M.L.A.

Dr. James Smith, M.L.A.

John MacEachern, M.L.A.

Danny Graham, M.L.A.

John Holm, M.L.A.

SECTION II

Committee Deliberations:

The Committee devoted at least one meeting to each area under its jurisdiction, before committing itself to one major project, the subject of learning disabilities.

The Committee's first exposure, as a group, to the complexities of learning disabilities, was on May 2, when it met with representatives from the Department of Education, Bridgeway Academy (a private school for the learning disabled situated in Wolfville and in Dartmouth, N.S.) and the Learning Disabilities Association of Nova Scotia. This first session captured the Committee's attention and, as a result, another meeting was held on June 13 with the same group.

It was at this second meeting that the Committee made the unanimous decision to study this subject in depth, with the intention of making some positive changes in the lives of the children and adults in this province who are afflicted with one or more of the many disorders associated with learning disabilities.

The task of researching the subject followed. An extensive amount of data was collected from learning disabilities associations and departments of education nationwide. The Committee also looked into teacher training programmes in Special Education, both provincially (Acadia, Dalhousie, St. Francis Xavier and Saint Mary's Universities) and nationally (York University) as well as the United States (Lesley College, Cambridge, Massachusetts).

On September 12 and 13, the first of a series of forums on learning disabilities was held by the Committee. This was followed by similar hearings on October 24 and December 12. Witnesses from a broad range of specializations were heard. The Committee was particularly impressed by the personal accounts of a learning disabled adult, currently a law student at Dalhousie University who, despite his academic success, has had a difficult struggle in reaching this point and indeed, his struggle is ongoing. His achievement, however, is an exception. Not all learning disabled students are given the opportunities he received and quite often, through lack of understanding, never realize their full potential.

Effects of the Current System on the L.D. Child:

People who suffer from learning disabilities are burdened also by the rather negative perception, by many others (including some teachers) about their level of intelligence. In actual fact, the opposite is usually

true. As a result of such negative attitudes, these students have exceptionally low self-esteem and often drop out of an education system that is not equipped for their needs. They need an approach to learning which recognizes their special needs and builds on their strengths.

The situation can be so devastating to some children that there have been instances of suicide. One witness quoted from a suicide note left by such a Nova Scotian child. It simply read, "I'm stupid." Such tragedies could be prevented with some careful planning for the needs of these children.

Because of their lack of self-worth, which in itself leads to a lack of self-motivation, many of these students grow into adults who are dependent upon social assistance and some, unfortunately, find their way into the penal system. The cost to the Province of Nova Scotia, in these instances, in both social and economic terms, far outweighs any cost associated with setting some education reforms in place.

The Learning Disabled Adult:

It is essential that the needs of the learning disabled adult not be overlooked. The Committee has made a concerted effort to arrive at recommendations that would address the needs of these individuals, who have struggled all their lives with one or more of the many different types of learning disabilities.

Special Education Facilities in Nova Scotia:

Only a few special education facilities exist in the province of Nova Scotia, i.e. Landmark East and Bridgeway Academy (2 locations). They are privately run on a non-profit basis. Many of the children that attend these schools have the added trauma of being separated from their families, because of the distance between their homes and the school. After a period of up to three years, the students are successfully re-integrated back into the regular school system.

These schools are largely the result of the hard work and determination of parents who had the means to find some alternative for their child. On November 14, the Headmaster of Landmark East graciously agreed to the Committee's request for a tour of his school. Landmark East is a model for this type of facility and the Committee was duly impressed. Some Members had an opportunity to speak candidly with students and were quite moved both by their positive attitude toward learning

and their progress at Landmark East after having struggled in the regular school system.

Unfortunately, the existing schools of this nature in Nova Scotia are unable to cope with the number of students who require their help and guidance. Also, these institutions currently receive no government assistance, resulting in a prohibitive cost for tuition and board to the average parent.

Nova Scotia Statistics on Learning Disabilities:

According to statistics submitted to the Canadian Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) by the Department of Education in January 1988, there are 169,581 students in the Nova Scotia public school system. Fully 7% (12,106) of this group are estimated to be learning disabled.

Of these 12,106 learning disabled students, 1% (121) are at high risk and should have a total impact structure such as Landmark East or Bridgeway Academy can provide. These children cannot be helped in the mainstream public school system.

The remaining children in this category (11,985) can, with assistance, remain in the mainstream. There are 116 learning disabled children currently receiving specialized guidance at Landmark East and Bridgeway Academy. It is essential that the Nova Scotia public school system adopt a mechanism to deal more effectively with this large group of children.

Conclusion

The subject of learning disabilities has been dealt with judiciously in provinces such as Ontario and Alberta, with many others following suit. We cannot emphasize strongly enough the need for similarly constructive improvements in the Nova Scotia public school system, at the same time recognizing the importance of specialized facilities such as Landmark East and Bridgeway Academy.

Although there are reforms possible with modest cost implications, any recommendations that the Committee has made that do involve cost, were made after very careful and deliberate consultation. The Committee feels that this is an essential investment in the future of the province, and that it should be addressed as such.

SECTION III

Recommendations

With respect, the Standing Committee on Human Resources submits the following list of recommendations for the Minister's consideration. The Committee wishes to emphasize its concern that these recommendations be addressed at the earliest possible convenience. It is hoped that constructive changes can and will be made during the 1990-1991 school year.

A.P.S.E.A.

a) In consideration of the time restraints placed on parents who are desirous of having their children enrolled in schools such as Landmark East, the Committee strongly recommends that:

> APSEA review the process by which they approve or disapprove applications for assistance, thereby giving the parents ample time to make the necessary preparations for the child's coming year.

b) The Department of Education should review with APSEA, the process by which it assesses those students who have been recommended by a school official, for a second year at Landmark East or like institutions.

Public Awareness

a) A grant should be made to the Learning Disabilities Association of Nova Scotia, sufficient to allow them to establish an office for a period of no less than three years, to provide not only a liason between the government and the public, but a strong advocacy program for parents, who at present have nowhere to turn.

b) A pamphlet should be circulated to the public via Nova Scotia Power Corporation invoices to make them aware of the problems facing the learning disabled.

Student Assessment

a) The Committee strongly urges that a process be established whereby appropriate assessments are available, in addition to those done at the Izaak Walton Killam Hospital. This process should take into serious consideration, the difficulties faced by those persons who do not have ready access to the metro area.

b) The Committee recognizes that many children with special needs go undetected and therefore recommends that the early assessment program be strengthened province-wide and that school boards be given the resources necessary to follow-up on these students, throughout their school years.

Teacher Training

a) As part of the Institute on Learning Disabilities, which has already been established, the Committee strongly recommends that a Consortium be established with representation from the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union, the Atlantic Association of Universities and the Learning Disabilities Association of Nova Scotia. This group would work in co-operation with the Institute of Learning Disabilities through the Department of Education.

b) The Department of Education should work in conjunction with school boards and the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union to provide all teaching professionals and board members with workshops or in-service days on the recognition of the learning disabled and an awareness of their needs.

c) A co-operative program should be set up between universities and schools which deliver Learning Disability Programs, to provide Education students the opportunity of first-hand experience with the learning disabled.

d) All universities and institutions which offer teacher training programs should also offer training programs for teachers and teachers' aides on the subject of learning disabilities.

Policies - Department of Education

a) Specific communication procedures should be put in place in the education system with the rights and obligations of all parties clearly delineated; parents should be included in all aspects of the decision-making process regarding their children.

b) The Committee recognizes that children do have a right to assessment planning and we would urge the Department of Education, through the Institute on Learning Disabilities, to develop an appropriate appeal process and in so doing, review the Ontario model for appeal procedures. Particular emphasis should be placed on the effectiveness of such a process from the local level.

c) When developing new programs, the Department of Education should test their effectiveness through controlled pilot projects.

d) A co-ordinated effort should be made to ensure that all policies regarding learning disabled students are implemented throughout the Nova Scotia school system.

Curriculum Changes

a) The problems posed by the requirement of a second-language for high school graduation can be insurmountable, and therefore, the Committee strongly recommends that the Department of Education adopt some flexibility where learning disabled (and hearing disabled) students are concerned.

b) Advocates for the learning disabled, in concert with the Institute on Learning Disabilities, should be consulted when changes to the curriculum are proposed.

c) The Department of Education should produce a policy paper(s) on approved curriculum modifications for students with learning disabilities...i.e. the use of teaching/learning aids such as dictaphones, personal computers, etc. and the provision of oral examinations as an option to these students.

Adult Education

a) The Institute on Learning Disabilities should develop, with appropriate agencies, a means of referral for adults seeking remedial reading and writing instruction, to persons qualified in the area of learning disabilities.

Legislature

a) The Institute on Learning Disabilities, as proposed by the Minister of Education, is fully supported by the Committee Members, and the government should provide it with the necessary resources.

Financial Assistance - Parents

a) The Department of Education should review the funding levels available through APSEA and the methods used in assessing eligibility for assistance.

b) Parents should be granted a tax deduction on educational expenses incurred on behalf of their learning disabled children.

Recommended In Principle

a) The Committee recognizes the need for doctoral level training of psycho-educational diagnosticians.

b) The Committee recognizes the need for research into learning disabilities from a Nova Scotia perspective.

c) The Committee has considered the funding of these programs and recommends that the Formula Review Committee study a separate mechanism for determining funding levels for learning disabled categories.

Other Suggestions

In the course of its study, this Committee received other suggestions which, while worthwhile, require much further assessment, and in some cases, are beyond the scope of this committee's mandate.

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